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Egypt-Israel buildup reported

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Mideast nuclear stockpile?

By Dana Adams Schmidt
Staff correspondent of
The Christian Science Monitor

Washington
U.S. intelligence sources believe that the fourth Arab-Israeli war has resulted in a confrontation between Egypt and Israel on the level of nuclear warheads.

While this information cannot be officially confirmed and is sure to be denied, intelligence sources believe it to be reliable nonetheless.

On the Israeli side, according to the best information available, there are some 60 300-mile-range Jericho missiles. While these could be armed with conventional warheads, the Israelis are believed to have ready to put together, and may indeed have actually put together, at least eight nuclear warheads. All these materials, missiles and warheads, have been built by the Israelis themselves in Israel.

On the Egyptian side, comparable weapons in Soviet military hands are believed to have reached Egypt during the recent war in response to insistent Egyptian demands that they be given at least as much in offensive weapons as the Israelis have.

Moscow has previously held back on offensive weapons; this was the cause of the break in the summer of 1972 when President Anwar al-Sadat ordered the Russians out of Egypt. The nuclear warheads may, in the opinion of intelligence analysts, be the Russians' attempt to find a basis for resuming their former position in Egypt.

American intelligence has been almost certain since Nov. 2 that 20 SCUD-type missiles with a range of up to 180 miles were delivered to Egypt. Since then careful shadowing of Soviet ships entering the Mediterranean from the Black Sea and traveling to Egyptian ports has confirmed that several vessels carried nuclear material to Egypt.

Some of the material is believed to have been unloaded under the supervision of a special Soviet military unit. How much is unknown.

The Russians have never given away or sold any nuclear weapons, any more than the U.S. has.

But the Russians have missiles with nuclear warheads in Eastern European countries, much as the U.S. stations such weapons in Germany.

The U.S. is taking an intense interest in these developments because of implications for the possible escalation of the Middle Eastern conflict. Thus far, neither Russians nor Egyptians nor Israelis have been willing to acknowledge any part of what American intelligence believes to have taken place.

The magazine Aviation Week said on Nov. 5 that satellite photographs proved that two brigades of mobile Soviet SCUD missiles had been unloaded in Egypt.

The photographs were undoubtedly the source of this information. Both the Israeli and the Soviet missiles are believed to be so costly that it is unlikely they would have been built exclusively to carry conventional warheads.

A great deal more is known about the Israeli nuclear effort than about what has happened in Egypt in the last few weeks.

Israeli nuclear weapons' capacity is based on the nuclear reactor at Dimona in the Negev, which was built by French technicians between 1957 and 1964. This establishment is similar to one at Savannah River, Fla., in the U.S., which has been the source of much of the U.S.'s own plutonium stockpile.

With the unit at Dimona, the Israelis have the capacity each year to build one or more bombs of 19-kiloton

strength, equivalent to the ones dropped by the U.S. Air force on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

Israel has declined thus far to sign the nuclear nonproliferation agreement, but the Israelis have said they would never be first to use nuclear weapons. Egypt has signed the agreement, but such weapons in the hands of Russians would presumably not constitute a violation.

The Israelis have a second nuclear plant of smaller capacity built by the U.S. at Nahal Soreq near Tel Aviv.

The Egyptians have a nuclear reactor built by the Soviet Union at Inchass, but it has a capacity of only two megawatts, compared with 24 megawatts for the Israeli plant at Dimona.

Technicians estimate that it would take seven or eight years to produce enough plutonium from the Inchass plant to build a nuclear weapon.